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AUTHOR Hawthorne, Rebecca Killen
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influences shaping the curriculum decision-making process of four English teachers in two middle schools in order to identify sources of professional autonomy and obligation in classroom curriculum. These teachers made decisions daily by selecting content, texts and materials, modes of presentation, learning activities, and evaluation methods to construct classroom curriculum. However, they worked within hierarchical public schools that placed highly visible constraints upon their professional discretion. The translation of prescribed curricular policy into the operational curriculum of the classroom occurred through each teacher's individual interpretation of policy. Obligations mediating this process included obligations to the teaching profession, to the organization within which they worked, to students and parents, and to personal values and beliefs. A comparative case study of the sources of influence on the four teachers' curricular choices provided insight into the tensions between autonomy and obligation over the shaping of classroom curriculum. The teachers' curricular choices were documented over a period of two weeks by means of observation and stimulated recall interviews. Factors shaping curricular choices were identified, and the tensions between autonomy and obligation are described. (JD)

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CLASSROOM CURRICULUM:

BALANCING AUTONOMY AND OBLIGATION

Rebecca Killen Hawthorne

Paper presented at the AERA Annual Meeting
April 1987

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Shaping classroom practice -- deciding what to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate what has been taught -- is the stuff of the teaching profession. Teachers make these decisions daily by selecting content, texts and materials, modes of presentation, learning activities, and evaluation methods to construct classroom curriculum. The professional autonomy associated with these choices characterizes the conception of teachers as professionals. But teachers are unusual professionals for they work within hierarchical, public organizations that place highly visible constraints upon their professional discretion. To understand the limits and possibilities of professional autonomy in making decisions about curriculum and teaching, indepth analyses of the sources of influence on teachers' curricular choices are necessary. The purpose of my research is to investigate the constellation of influences shaping the curriculum decision-making process of four classroom teachers in order to identify sources of professional autonomy and obligation in classroom curriculum.

The translation of prescribed curricular policy into the operational curriculum of the classroom occurs through teachers' individual interpretations of policy. A number of obligations mediate this process and shape the ultimate realization of curricular policy -- obligations to the teaching profession, to the organization within which teachers work, to the clients (both students and parents) they serve, and to personal values and beliefs. These multiple obligations provide the key to teacher choice (Shulman, 1983). Faced with competing and, at

times, conflicting obligations upon their instructional programs, teachers pick and choose, depending upon circumstances. Teachers' responses, not always conscious, translate policy into practice and integrate obligations to profession, organization, client, and self into classroom curriculum.

The Study

Four experienced English teachers, two in each of two middle schools, acted as primary informants for my study. The two school sites differed by district in their degree of curricular prescriptiveness -- the extent to which formal guidelines specified the five dimensions of operational curriculum (content, texts/materials, presentation, activities, evaluation). I documented the teachers' curricular choices along all five dimensions by shadowing each teacher for the entire school day over a two week period, supplementing extensive classroom observation with informal interviewing and document analysis. Through retrospective interviews and stimulated recall exercises based on documented curricular choices, I identified the configuration of factors shaping curricular choice and described the tensions between autonomy and obligation over classroom curriculum. Interviews with secondary informants (teaching colleagues, department chairs, principals, and district curriculum personnel) and document collection and analysis provided sources of corroboration.

Case study analyses took the form of educational criticisms of each of the four teachers (Eisner, 1985). Beginning with descriptive renderings of classroom curriculum choices, I traced sources of influence outward and upward through the web of professional, organizational, client, and personal obligations -- what may be termed "backward mapping" (Elmore, 1980) -- to arrive at interpretations and explanations about the constellation of factors shaping classroom curricular practice. Through cross-case analysis I compared and contrasted the four criticisms, identifying common themes relevant to curricular choice and classroom instruction that I describe in the following pages.

The Constellation of Factors Influencing Curricular Choice

Eighth grade English looks very different in each of these four teachers' classrooms, both in terms of form and content. Donald Erickson tailors curricular practice to an independent work model while Barb Grant clusters student desks to facilitate cooperative learning. Cecilia Wheeler identifies reading as the "strongest focus" of her curriculum. Whereas Jim Sellwood tucks literature and reading "episodically" around grammar and writing instruction, the "core" of his classes. Such differences reflect the professional expertise and personal preferences of individual teachers. Jim Sellwood states the case succinctly: "My own interests and involvement with language shape the classroom. I just don't feel as comfortable with literature as I do with grammar and composition...."

Professional knowledge, both subject-specific and pedagogical, undergirds each teacher's conceptualization of the English curriculum, sequencing of instruction, and daily curricular choices. Differences among teachers reflect not only variations in teacher knowledge but the nature of their subject matter as well.

> English is just... we're talking about literature, reading... we're talking about spelling, vocabulary... we're talking about writing and grammar... And every year, there's some kind of a <u>push</u> to do more of this or to do more of that. And when you do more of something then something else gets left off! So it's just a balancing act.
>
> Donald Erickson

The balancing act assumes concrete form in multiple textbooks -- literature anthologies, spelling programs, vocabulary workbooks, composition books, and grammar texts. English lacks an underlying continuum of skills.

> In English you can't necessarily put skills on a continuum. For example, writing compound sentences... where do you put that on a continuum of skills with one skill coming before the next skill? You can do that in math, but in English it just doesn't <u>work</u>!
>
> Jim Sellwood

Without such a continuum, teachers are left to weave the various components of eighth grade English into a coherent pattern for themselves and their students. Patterns emerge as individual as the weavers.

Sources of professional knowledge as well as content vary from teacher to teacher. Barb Grant reads professional journals voraciously, attends numerous in-service sessions, and exchanges

ideas with colleagues within and outside her district. Donald Erickson maintains his NCTE membership and attends workshops regularly but prefers to create new curricular strategies in solitude. Cecilia Wheeler dislikes leaving her class for any in-service training, drawing upon her own educational background instead ("I keep a set of the reading anthology American Literature in the room. It's really good. I had this stuff in the eighth grade so I can gage how far the kids are behind..."). Jim Sellwood, the only one of the four who received "on-the-job training" teaching in a private high school as opposed to formal teacher preparation, relies upon knowledge gleaned from his personal experience in the classroom to guide curricular choices.

Students provide an invaluable source of influence on curricular choices, inspiring all four teachers to search for new approaches and techniques.

> Definitely the students are the people who shape what I do the most! In the way they handle things... how they do on a test, how they write something, or how many behavior problems there are...
>
> Donald Erickson

Barb Grant cites the importance of tailoring classroom curriculum to individual students' needs, and Cecilia Wheeler cultivates one-on-one interaction on a daily basis to assess student learning. Jim Sellwood summarizes the essence of the teacher-student relationship and its influence on curricular choice. "Their deficiencies and my abilities shape what I do."

Who these teachers are, what they believe in, and the wealth of their personal experiences interact with professional expertise and student abilities to shape curricular choices. Donald Erickson teaches his eighth graders poetry each year because, "I enjoy poetry, and it's a good change in pace. It's kind of like dessert." He admits a personal prejudice toward research papers.

> I just think in general research papers are not good writing... all you're doing is going around and reading and then copying stuff, and you're not doing anything with your own experience. I'm really sold on writing from your own experience.

In the classroom next to him, Cecilia Wheeler devotes three weeks to research papers ("I love to teach expository writing!") and skips poetry noting, "They had a lot of poetry in sixth grade." Jim Sellwood's linguistics background colors his grammar-oriented English curriculum as vividly as Barb Grant's personal experiences growing up as a black female in the South promote her cross-cultural presentation of literature. In each classroom, the person shines through curricular choices as brightly as the professional.

The Organization: An Environment Supportive of Teacher Autonomy

A consistent pattern of influence over classroom curricular choice emerges from the cross-case analysis. For all these teachers, professional expertise in conjunction with personal values and experience shape selections of content, texts and materials, presentation, activities, and evaluation methods in

all four classrooms. An explanation for the pervasive influence of personal and professional factors rests in those factors which appear to have little direct influence over teachers' curricular choices -- the organizational factors that establish the environment within which these professionals work.

Donald Erickson and Cecilia Wheeler teach in a school and district that vest classroom teachers with ultimate responsibility for curricular choice. The eighth grade English course description received from the district office is anything but prescriptive, listing general topics in behavioral form. Norms, both professional and organizational, enhance personal and professional autonomy. Little, if any, communication exists across grades and schools or within the eighth grade. Supervisor respect for teacher individuality translates into little supervision and minimal direction. On those rare occasions when teachers are observed, feedback is accepted politely and then dismissed.

> Frankly, I look at that as the department chair has to do it, and it's just part of district policy. And it's nice because he's very complimentary, but it's not really worth anything... between you and me and the gatepost.
>
> Donald Erickson

Little curriculum development and no formal curriculum evaluation occur at either school or district level. That does not mean curriculum development, evaluation, and revision do not occur. According to the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction,

> [T]he curriculum is being evaluated by the people who are most intimately involved, and

> those are the people teaching it. And if it isn't working, they tell us and we change it.

The translation of curriculum policy into classroom practice is viewed in this school and district as a personal, professional endeavor.

Jim Sellwood and Barb Grant, in contrast, teach in a school and district that boast of a highly structured, centralized curriculum. The district office provides teachers with detailed courses of study containing lists of specific behavioral objectives with corresponding skills and materials charts. District curriculum personnel oversee the development of curricular policy by teams of teachers and department chairs who then return to their school sites and work on implementation. Having served as English department chair, Jim for one year and Barb for five, both have had opportunity to interject themselves into district curriculum policy in the form of broad approaches, types of materials, and specific assignments. As the department chair controls purchases of texts and materials at the school site, a second opportunity arises for personal and professional autonomy. Perhaps the greatest opportunity revolves around monitoring of policy implementation. The department chair, primarily responsible for monitoring curricular implementation on site, defines the degree of curricular autonomy his or her colleagues maintain over their classrooms. Believing strongly in leading by example rather than direction, both Jim and Barb and their current successor preserve the sanctity of individual teachers' curricular practice, transforming a prescriptive

organizational environment into one supportive of teacher autonomy over classroom curriculum. Thus the organization has little, if any, direct influence on teachers' curricular choices in either district.

Although the organizations within which they work levy little direct pressure on any of the four teachers, indirect organizational press arising from teacher work conditions is considerable. A teaching load of five classes (four preps each for Barb Grant and Donald Erickson) and 118-142 students makes substantial professional and personal demands. Curricula must be prepared and instruction orchestrated as well as vast numbers of student-teacher interactions executed within time constraints over which teachers have no control. The organization, at times, hinders more than helps by impinging upon precious class time with extracurricular activities (e.g. yearbook collection and class contests), intruding upon instruction with intercom announcements ("This is the principal speaking. The campus will be open for lunch today. The athletic fields, however, are off-limits."), and interrupting unit sequence with schoolwide testing. Donald Erickson speaks for all four teachers when he shudders in mock horror, "I wish I could just close the door and they'd leave me alone!"

Indirect organizational press is heightened by high expectations of both the districts and their communities. Barb Grant explains it as a "snowball effect... The recognition of achievement is great, but it puts more pressure on you!" Parental involvement, focusing more frequently on <u>how well</u>

students are performing as opposed to what they are doing, adds a dimension to the teachers' loads that requires both time and energy. And the paperwork, both administrative and instructional, promises to bury conscientious English teachers. It is these indirect organizational factors -- the paper burden, parental and community expectations, organizational interruptions, and heavy teaching load -- that weigh upon all four teachers' curricular choices and illuminate the tension between autonomy and obligation that characterizes their classroom curriculum. How does one preserve the autonomous construction of classroom curriculum while meeting the organizational obligations of teaching?

The Balancing Act

Resolving tension between autonomy and obligation requires a balancing act whereby teachers negotiate competing demands. The negotiation process, like the curriculum it produces, is as individual as the negotiators. Donald Erickson has devised a series of creative self-defense strategies -- classroom administrative routines, core instructional activities, "staggered curricula," an independent work model, and "evaluation packets." Such strategies remain true to his personal and professional beliefs while simultaneously addressing the organizational realities of his teaching load. His colleague Cecilia Wheeler relies upon their department chairperson to mediate her organizational obligations. The department chair assigns Cecilia a teaching schedule that will

"keep her well" (multiple sessions of the same classes) and shifts her correcting load to a paid reader. Cecilia is then able to design classroom curriculum around student abilities and personal commitments, confident that organizational obligations will be dealt with at the department level. In a contrasting school district, Barb Grant put herself in the position of department chair, thereby defining organizational policy and practice and assuring her autonomy over classroom curriculum. Essentially, she works the system to her own ends. And Jim Sellwood, buffered by the "hands-off" professionalism of his colleagues and department chair, deals with organizational obligation by maintaining a curricular holding pattern -- recycling the same, well-worn ditto year after year to each of his classes. Each of these balancing acts reveals the complexity of curricular choice and its individual nature, raising important implications for policy makers and teacher educators.

Implications

The pervasive influence of individual teachers' professional expertise in conjunction with personal values and experience over curricular choices highlights the importance of professional development. If teachers rely upon their professional knowledge in curricular decision-making, what that knowledge is comprised of, where and when it is gained, and how well it "fits" with personal values and experience become key

concerns. Teacher learning, both pre-service and in-service, assumes priority status.

Knowledge is one thing. The ability to act on one's knowledge is another. Jim Sellwood describes the frustration of being exposed to professional ideas and techniques which he is unable to implement in his classroom:

> I've taken a couple of Bay Area Writing workshops and Project Write workshops. They've been pretty good. Some of the things that they mention I've been able to do. Others, I just haven't been able to sustain very long... Maybe I need more support or more ongoing support about that kind of program. I've <u>never</u> been able to feel successful, for example, about having students discuss their own writing in groups.

The cultivation of professional expertise requires ongoing support and monitoring. Support levels must vary in response to the differing capabilities of individual teachers. The striking contrast between Jim Sellwood and Barb Grant exemplifies the inadequacy of one level of support for all teachers -- Barb flourishes and Jim flounders under the same system. Thus support issues demand the attention of policymakers and practitioners alike. How much support do various teachers need? Who is best qualified to provide that support? What is the best setting for professional support (in-class, out-of-class, or some combination of the two)? When is such support most valuable?

We need to explore further the process by which teachers negotiate competing demands to shape classroom curriculum. My investigation raises a number of important questions. How do

English teachers differ from teachers in other disciplines? Does a more highly structured subject such as mathematics where instruction often revolves around a single textbook alter the pervasive influences on teacher curricular choices? How do patterns of choice change during the course of teacher careers? Donald Erickson and Jim Sellwood reported dependence on textbooks during their early years in the classroom:

> The books pretty much defined the curriculum as I recall... I use to go through them from cover to cover. Now I pick and choose.
> Jim Sellwood

Studies of teachers at various career stages will begin to unravel the complexity of curricular choice and help us grasp the evolving role of professional knowledge and personal experience in the construction of classroom curriculum. By framing research and policy to attend to the "person" in curriculum -- the teaching professional who daily selects content, texts and materials, presentation, activities, and evaluation methods -- we will better understand the individual translation of curricular policy into classroom practice.

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